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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 006671

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2023
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: CHARGE PRESSES MFA ON WSJ REPORTER'S VISA

REF: A. 10/12 MOELING-EAP/CM E-MAIL
[1](#)B. 10/10 MOELING-EAP/CM E-MAIL

Classified By: DCM Dan Piccuta, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Per ref A, the Charge d'Affaires met with the MFA Information Department DG October 12 to press him to issue a residency permit to a Pulitzer Prize-winning Wall Street Journal correspondent. The DG, Liu Jianchao, stressed that the visa denial for journalist Ian Johnson was due to Johnson's support for the "Falun Gong, our enemy." The Charge observed that China could find this action very damaging to its international reputation, particularly in the United States, and that many people will draw conclusions about China based on this case. DG Liu said the case "has nothing to do with China's policy towards the United States or towards the Wall Street Journal but is solely based on this person's actions." The Charge replied that on the contrary, this case would be seen as a test of China's press freedoms. The DG appeared to leave the door open to further negotiation on the case. End Summary.

WALL STREET JOURNAL REQUEST

[1](#)2. (C) Wall Street Journal Beijing Bureau Chief Rebecca Blumenstein and Mr. Johnson met with Pressoff October 10 (ref B) to request State Department assistance in clearing Chinese opposition to issuing Mr. Johnson a resident journalist visa. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department Director-General Liu Jianchao had told Ms. Blumenstein and then-WSJ Asia editor John Bussey on June 12 that Mr. Johnson had "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people" with his articles on the Falun Gong, written during his 1997-2001 stint with the WSJ in Beijing. DG Liu said Johnson is a "Falun Gong supporter." For this reason, out of the 831 visa applications from foreign journalists that China had received over the past few years, Mr. Johnson's would be the first refused.

[1](#)3. (C) Mr. Johnson, who was predominately an economic reporter during his previous stint in China, won a Pulitzer Prize for his series on the Falun Gong and allegations of Chinese torture shortly after he left Beijing in the spring of 2001. In a subsequent book compilation of articles from China entitled "Wild Grass," he included the Falun Gong articles. The MFA cited the book as proof that Mr. Johnson continues to be a Falun Gong supporter.

[1](#)4. (C) The WSJ cited similarities in the cases of Wall Street Journal reporter Andy Higgins and Washington Post correspondent John Pomfret, both of whom had faced legal difficulties during previous stints in China due to their reporting and then been denied subsequent visas. John Pomfret was able to return to China in 1997 after pressure on the Chinese from the Embassy, State Department and other high-profile Americans.

15. (C) Then-Charge d'Affaires Dan Piccuta, accompanied by Public Affairs Officer Don Q. Washington and notetakers, met with DG Liu, who is also the MFA spokesman, on October 12. The Charge noted the principle of consistent application of visa policy in discussing Johnson's case, noting that the journalist had not to our knowledge ever been detained nor encountered legal problems during his previous stint in China. The Charge pointed out that the objectionable passage of Johnson's book is actually a reprint of articles on the Falun Gong that ran while he was resident in China, and that the Chinese government did not object at the time. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs decision not to grant him a residency permit now is therefore "confusing." This decision could give the impression that China is limiting press freedom. Short-term visas for Johnson, he said, are not a workable solution because this method already caused Johnson to miss the 17th Party Congress. (Note: At the June 12 meeting between the MFA and WSJ's Blumenstein and then-Asia Editor John Bussey, WSJ proposed short-term visas to allow Johnson to cover China. Johnson subsequently confirmed to Pressoff that he received a 12-day visa to cover the early October Special Olympics in Shanghai, but that his extension request to cover the Party Congress was denied.)

16. (C) DG Liu said he shares the Charge's concern about Johnson's case and noted that the MFA has spoken with WSJ several times about it. DG Liu emphasized that the decision not to grant a residency visa is not an editorial matter. He noted that there are thousands of news reports filed on China every day, not all of them positive, and that China "welcomes

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criticism and foreign opinion." But Falun Gong is different because the group is banned by Chinese law. Any activity related to the Falun Gong is therefore illegal, DG Liu continued, and China does not agree with anyone supporting Falun Gong because the group "is our enemy." DG Liu said Johnson's writing contains "a lot of fabrications." This would make it hard for China to accept Johnson as a resident journalist "so far," he said. DG Liu mentioned that WSJ suggested the short-term visa solution, and claimed that China had agreed, granting "all visa applications, including the one to cover the Party Congress." (Note: Johnson told Pressoff separately that he could have covered part of the Party Congress under his 12-day visa, but only if he had sacrificed covering the Special Olympics, which were held two weeks earlier.)

17. (C) DG Liu said that he does not want to give the impression that China is closing itself to the media, and in fact China has issued more than 800 journalist visas. Of course, he clarified, issuing a visa does not mean that China agrees to all the reports that a journalist writes or has written. He noted that China has "agreed to provide better service to journalists for the Olympics" with new regulations as of January 1, 2007. While there have been "some problems in trying to make the regulations known throughout the country," he acknowledged, this is nonetheless "an important service."

NEXT STEPS: "CONTINUE DISCUSSION"

18. (C) The Charge emphasized that his meeting with DG Liu was prompted by the Embassy's responsibility to help the American public understand China, as well as explain the United States to China. The potential for Americans to draw conclusions about China's press freedoms on the basis of this high-profile case "is obvious," the Charge said. It would be a shame, he observed, if the Chinese government's efforts to be more open to journalists were eclipsed by public relations fallout from the Johnson case.

¶9. (C) Pushing back on the Charge's observation that the Chinese government had not objected to Johnson's Falun Gong reporting when it first appeared, DG Liu stated that the MFA and WSJ had agreed to discuss this issue "in a quiet atmosphere, but that does not mean we agree or accept Johnson's reports and fabrications." He said that the decision on Johnson's visa is unrelated to China's policy towards the United States or WSJ, and is a matter applying only to Johnson himself. "We will continue to talk," he concluded.

¶10. (C) Comment: DG Liu's qualifying comments of no resolution "so far" and willingness to "continue to talk" appear to leave the door open to further interventions. While Johnson could continue to request short-term visas to cover China, his reporting would be scrutinized, particularly in the run-up to the Olympic Games next summer. The WSJ believes they cannot resolve Johnson's case without USG assistance. WSJ Beijing Bureau Chief told us that WSJ Publisher Gordon Crovitz and/or Managing Editor Marcus Brauchli plan to contact Deputy Secretary Negroponte to discuss the case further. End Comment.
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